

**WHAT HAPPENED TO THE F WORD?  
FEMINISMS AND PUBLIC SOCIOLOGIES**

Rosemary Du Plessis

Women's Breakfast  
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School of Sociology and Anthropology, University of Canterbury, PB 4800,  
Christchurch 8140, New Zealand

[rosemary.duplessis@canterbury.ac.nz](mailto:rosemary.duplessis@canterbury.ac.nz)

Tena koutou, tena koutou katoa

Welcome to this breakfast meeting!

Thank you to Maureen Baker for inviting me to talk at this event today. Like Linda Tuhiwai Smith, I made the commitment in November 2006, when the challenges of giving an address at 7.30 in the morning was not in the forefront of my mind. However, from a chilly November life in the UK, the possibilities of being in warm, sunny Auckland in December was a significant attraction. Thanks to the organisers of this conference for bringing us together in this complex, diverse and stunningly located city. And welcome to those of you from Australia! As one of those who organised the combined meeting of Australian and New Zealand sociologists at College House, University of Canterbury in 1981, it is great to be part of another such gathering, especially since I only have to talk at breakfast and not manage the registrations and organise the crèche, as I did in 1981. (And maybe that we did organise a crèche and create a roster for all the staff and grad students to provide this service says something about those times!)

Linda Tuhiwai Smith started her address yesterday with a series of stories and a challenge to sociologists in Australasia to think about the people, issues, epistemologies and political questions that are absent in our teaching and research programmes. She asked us to imagine what indigenous sociologies might look like in the Antipodes. I will also weave some stories into my talk today – partly because story telling was a significant part of my growing up, and partly because I think that doing sociology is telling stories. I want to reflect on the identification in the 1970s of other absent 'publics', issues and political questions and how they were addressed by what many of us came to call 'feminist sociology'. I'd like to examine what appears to be a 'successful' response to challenges to sociology similar to the challenge that Linda Tuhiwai Smith offered

yesterday. I'd like to reflect on how the 'success' of such challenges may precipitate other challenges.

Such a talk inevitably involves me constructing a partial, positioned, personal and necessarily inadequate account about feminist sociology. My focus is also problematic at a Trans-Tasman event because it focuses on Aotearoa New Zealand. But stories work in the world and have effects because they do not exist in isolation. Stories prompt stories, stories of connection, stories of difference, stories that illustrate the inadequacies of the story just heard. It is in that spirit that I offer my stories (and some questions) today – to prompt good conversation between people who do not know one another at this breakfast, and potentially even stories, reflections and analysis that migrate into lunches, afternoon teas and dinners. My biggest hope is that it will prompt more over talk about the F word – feminism – and its relevance to our teaching of sociology and contemporary sociological knowledge production. This includes what we might learn from sociology's engagement with feminism that might be useful in crafting lively and more inclusive sociological practices in response to the challenges that Linda Tuhiwai Smith posed yesterday.

The feminist project within sociology as I encountered it in the mid 1970s was a project shaped not by the agendas of the 'discipline', but by a multi-faceted social movement variously referred to as 'the women's movement' or 'the women's liberation movement'. After lively debate between liberal and radical feminists during the 1977 Women's Convention in Christchurch where the ostensible issue was whether or not male members of the media could attend such an event, Christine Dann, a feminist environmentalist and regular contributor to the NZ feminist magazine *broadsheet* published an article entitled: 'Will the real women's liberation movement please stand up?' This analytic piece dissected differences within the 'women's movement' and argued that change would only occur if political action was driven by 'the women's liberation movement' – women who were not just interested in identification as women or the end to formal discrimination, but committed to radical change in institutions, belief systems and ways of producing knowledge.

At that time 'women's liberation' rather than feminism was the cutting edge of women's politics. Not long after this lesbian feminist activists split from the *broadsheet* collective because its editor Sandra Coney was identified as heterosexist. A few years later, Donna Awatere, then a social movement activist rather than politician, chose *broadsheet* magazine as the vehicle for the first publication of her articles on Maori sovereignty. Her writing was not solely directed at white feminists, but it was the first sustained articulation by a Maori woman of the difficulties of constituting a homogenous 'women' public in Aotearoa New Zealand. Her work stands for an avalanche of writing and activism by women whose life experience did not fit the universalizing attempts by western feminists to define women as a political category or define strands of feminism. This writing by what some people identify as the Third World feminists

has come to inform much academic development studies courses offered by gender specialists in sociology, geography, political science, anthropology and other social sciences. It has significantly problematized earlier feminist attempts to constitute 'women' universally as a political category.

Debates in *broadsheet* were just a small facet of the challenging feminist politics of that era. This story illustrates the way in which new publics jousting for space in the political arena engage in practices of distinction among themselves as well as being categorized by others, favourably or unfavourably. Those who, for whatever reason, have been on the margins of formal knowledge production, absent among those exercising formal political power, with little access to positions of status or control over material resources - whether this is land appropriated through processes of colonisation or household income - may well struggle among themselves as they constitute new categories of political interest (such as 'women' or Maori). This is simultaneously both puzzling and a source of delight to those who construct them as 'others' - alternatively homogenized or constituted as flakey and superficial in their politics by exhibiting their differences. Hence the articulation of the categories Linda Tuhiwai Smith identified yesterday of iwi/tribes who have 'settled' and those who have not 'settled'.

Michael Burawoy has reflected positively on the way in which feminism constructed female standpoints, constituted new publics and identified the agendas for new policy debates (Burawoy, 2004: 13; 2005: 313-4). These processes were exhilarating but also difficult, destructive and personally demanding. In the process they generated much understandings that is highly relevant to how good social research and political work requires processes of both inclusion and distinction, lessons that I am still learning.

As liberal, radical, socialist, Marxist and lesbian feminists engaged in criticism of each others' political analysis and strategies and jockeyed with one another for the power to define 'women' as a political category and hence as a public, women students and teachers of sociology who organised and attended women's conventions, participated in consciousness raising groups, founded rape crisis and refuge centres and set up abortion hotlines and women's health centres started to bring the politics of feminism into the classroom and their research and writing. The sociology produced as a result of this process ranged from Ann Oakley's analysis of the politics of housework and her advocacy of interactive interviewing, to Dorothy Smith's classic article on 'A Sociology for Women', and Michele Barrett's *Women's Oppression Today*. Liberal, radical, socialist and Marxist feminism were all manifest in the work of women in the academy and often read and debated by women involved in union activism or establishing women's refuges.

Canadian feminist sociologist, Dorothy Smith, was probably the scholar who stretched my mind most at the time with her unique feminist combination of Marxist materialism, ethnomethodology and Foucauldian discourse analysis. Her

writing elegantly positioned women as strategic actors and subjects of discourse and articulated the contractions many of us faced at the time as we immersed ourselves in abstract theory while also mopping up after young children and cleaning the toilet. Her attention to the details of everyday life, including the sociology faculty meeting, spurred my interest in constant attention to gender as a component of interactions, political processes and forms of theorising. It opened up the possibility of one of my most purely pleasurable pieces of academic writing in the early 1990s which applied Smith's reflections in 'Texts, facts and femininity' to a documentary about former New Zealand model, Rachel Hunter.

This was a time when there was a relative absence of women teachers of sociology and yawning gaps in the presence of women professors and heads of departments. At the first sociology conference I attended there was a plenary session at which the heads of all the sociology programmes were arrayed in a panel to comment on the future of sociology – all were professors and none of them was a woman. As a young woman looking down from the tiered lecture theatre at the middle aged men below, I experienced a huge sense of physical and social distance from the articulate, earnest, but solidly phalanx of men below.

Now I am older than most of the men for whom I was an audience on that occasion, and think increasingly about how different I must seem from first year student audiences in the classes of 200 to whom I introduce some tidbits about contemporary analysis of gender and sexuality while they text one another and those outside the lecture theatre, play with their ipods and sometimes engage with the array of visual and textual material that diverts them care of the PowerPoint software.

While men dominated positions as professors and the NZ Sociological Association, which was in the mid '70s a branch of the Australian and New Zealand Sociological Association, they, like many men at the time, were responsive to the context of the women's (liberation?) movement. In 1975, International Women's Year, all those nominated to official positions on the Sociological Association Executive were women and an all women's executive came into being for the first time. It was a symbolic, if temporary way, of addressing women's relative absence. At this time courses on the sociology of gender and women's studies and women and society were introduced into sociology programmes and this was only possible because men with power in those programmes agreed to them being offered and often hired emerging MA and PhD students to do that work.

It was also from sociology programmes in New Zealand that individuals floated cross disciplinary women's studies agendas which addressed the dynamic and 'undisciplined' facets of feminist theorising, investigative work and political commentary. Rosemary Seymour at Waikato University facilitated the first women's studies network and organised the first women's studies conferences

which included academics, community activists, trade unionists, women professionals with an interest in critical gender analysis and women working in public service. Out of these early meetings emerged the NZ Women's Studies Association. The tradition of Women's Studies as a space for such intersecting sets of women continues and will be realized in February 2008 at a conference in Invercargill, right at the bottom of the South Island of New Zealand.

Margot Roth, a former journalist and WEA activist who completed her MA at University of Auckland, founded the *Women's Studies Journal* which has migrated to a number of different institutions, most recently the Women's Studies Programme at Massey University. The connections between the academic and non-academic strands of New Zealand feminism were highlighted when Margot Roth shared a home with Pat Rosier who followed Sandra Coney as editor of broadsheet in the 1980s.

For the small number of feminist sociologists in New Zealand in the 70s and 80s, work in sociology programmes would have been inconceivable without the interactions with scholars in other disciplines, especially education, history, political science, English, anthropology, law, geography and feminists in state bureaucracies, in trade unions, the feminist media, film and video makers and those providing services to women. My links to scholars in Australia was primarily through Women's Studies networks and conferences, rather than through sociology as a discipline. Partly this was an outcome of my own eclectic orientation. I did not complete an undergraduate degree in sociology, and so in some significant way, was never entirely socialized into 'professional sociology'. The cross disciplinary engagement of feminist scholarship, women's and gender studies was perhaps comfortable for this reason as well as fitting the political and intellectual context of my times. I existed in a social and political world in which other women would often challenge not just my sexual orientation (heterosexuality was not to be assumed) but also my location within one of the most conservative and male dominated institutions in the country, University of Canterbury.

At that time I was also sometimes challenged by feminists for jointly teaching a gender focused course with a male colleague. Charles Sedgwick and I started teaching a course on the sociology of gender in the late 1970s, informed by our mutual backgrounds in anthropology; this course was both comparative and focused on Aotearoa New Zealand. It seemed to me at the time that there was a need for community-based knowledge production and teaching that was women only **and** for courses like the one we taught that involved male and female sociologist/anthropologists providing and provoking critical gender analysis from female and male students.

We went on to teach a course in life history research and analysis in which we debated with one another, especially as his analysis became more overtly, and in my view, too exclusively Marxist. For me this type of work with a male colleague

was a necessary component of addressing absences in sociology and a complement to my attendance at all women Women's Studies meetings. The absences within sociology at the time were not just gaps in the investigation of women's lives, or inadequacies in the theorization and methodology, but a lack critical attention to masculinities. This work was a minority focus in the courses we taught, but it has grown to be a much more significant contribution by sociologists to feminist scholarship and the critical analysis of gender.

The work of R.W. Connell writing from the Australian context was to fill many of those gaps in the 1980s and 1990s. It was also interesting to observe how a number of feminist ideas, recycled through his work, were more readily accepted into the disciplinary canon than the work of some women sociologists. Men providing critical gender analyses are more likely to be seen by students and sometimes by their peers as less political, more theoretically sound and 'objective' than women scholars offering somewhat similar analyses.

I want to conclude by thinking about the relevance for some of these storied reflections for responses to the absences that Linda identified yesterday. I think that we do have the emergence in New Zealand of indigenous sociologies that do address some of the absences she identifies. I think particularly about the work of Tracey McIntyre at University of Auckland who chaired the opening Plenary session and the work of Evan Poata Smith at AUT and MA graduate Katrina Taupo from University of Canterbury who has provided a very interesting analysis of connections and differences between the ways in which differently positioned Maori groups respond to issues relating to genetic testing and biobanking.

Addressing gaps in the way in which sociology in Australia and NZ 'does' Maori, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues, rests in part on nurturing new generations of indigenous scholars and retaining them in academic work and perhaps in sociology programmes in particular. But it crucially involves thinking that filling the absences cannot and should not be exclusively the work of those who identify as indigenous people. Just as some men started to engage in critical gender analysis in the 1970s and early 1980s when some questioned their presence in this field, so many of us who teeter at the edges of critical analysis of indigenous issues may need to put our feet in the water. Like men who started teaching feminist theory and accepted positions in Gender Studies programmes, we are likely to experience discomfort and the reactions of some who think we have no place in these spaces. It will also require at least some Maori, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island scholars and political activists who will both provide criticism and feedback, but also stand with us in the class or in the conference venue while we respond to the challenges of these absences.

In some ways the gaps and absences that were the focus of critical feminist attention in sociology in the 1970s have been filled, by bodies of feminist theory, by critical pieces of investigative work, by the institutionalization of gender or

gender and sexuality strands within conferences, professional associations and teaching programmes. Male scholars who want to do good work on work and organisations, health, education, deviance, criminal justice, social statistics, politics, religion, media, sustainability and environmental studies all need to attend to feminist scholarly work, incorporate it into their teaching and refer to it in their papers. Burawoy's writing and presentations on the case for public sociology illustrate this very well. However, the vision of the 'women's liberation movement' was that the critique offered by feminists was fundamental, rather than a component of a well rounded analysis. While much of the feminist project in sociology is successful, I think in this respect it has some way to go.

The other interesting outcome of the mainstreaming of feminist analysis in sociology is that the F word has now become somewhat problematic. To claim to be a feminist sociologist when feminism is one of many 'perspectives' to which students are exposed is potentially to constitute one's self as problematically political and very 20<sup>th</sup> century. Male sociologists are cautious about applying that label to them selves, partly because some women have argued that it is a designation exclusively for women, or for women with particular forms of political analysis and commitment. For this reason they may sometimes be a better conduit of critical gender analysis than people like me.

Is this relevant to thinking about the absences Linda identified in how sociology and related disciplines addresses Maori and indigenous issues? In a context of a discipline which encourages the view that indigeneity, like gender is relational, historical and situational rather than inherent or essential, I am hopeful that a future generation of sociologists will engage in some interesting practices of knowledge production and political action.